Switching Mindsets Drains Self-Regulatory Resources

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People have the remarkable capacity to accomplish goals using drastically different mental states (called mindsets) that enable people to respond with different approaches, tendencies, dispositions, or readiness. The literature contains numerous theories using the notion that different mindsets solve similar problems in different ways, but a paucity of work has examined the mindsets themselves. We examine how people switch between mindsets and the concomitant effect of switching. We argue that switching requires executive functioning and taxes self-regulatory resources. Three studies support these claims, by comparing people who switch versus maintain mindsets related to promotion/prevention, locomotion/assessment, and abstract/concrete styles of operating.

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propensity of those in the motion condition to maintain their motion, causing them to behave no differently from those in the rest condition. A simple contrast illustrates the overall effect more clearly: the motion, no interrupt condition (the only condition in which participants experienced unmitigated motion) proceeded through the pieces of information at a faster rate (M=3.05 seconds) than those in the other three conditions combined (M=3.90 seconds per piece), F(1,41)=3.92, p=.05. So, these results triangulate the results from Study 1 by showing that taking away psychological motion results in a mitigation of the propensity to maintain motion. 

These studies provide evidence that once an individual perceives himself to be “moving”, the experience of psychological motion activates a motion state, resulting in a propensity to maintain motion. This exhibits itself behaviorally through (1) an increase in the propensity to engage in a subsequent task, and (2) a faster rate of progress through a given task. The relationship between psychological motion and the propensity to maintain that motion was reinforced by showing that when psychological motion is absent, so too is the propensity to maintain motion.

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**LONGABSTRACT**
One of the most enduring assumptions in psychological theory is that people often have multiple, redundant mental states that allow them to solve the same types of problems in different ways. These mental states, broadly referred to as mindsets, consist of sets of activated mental processes that result in a general disposition or readiness to respond in a certain manner. Some of the most prominent recent psychological theories are based on the idea that, in a given situation, activating one of these mindsets more than the other (or others) can change the preferences people construct, the judgments they form, the decisions they make, and the satisfaction they have with the outcomes.

The set of theories that assume people have multiple mindsets is extremely diverse, but they have several common elements. One assumption these theories tend to make is that people tend to have two or more mindsets available to them, and that when prompted by task demands or implicit primes, they can switch from one mindset to the other. Even in cases where culture or personal predisposition favor the chronic activation of one mindset, situational cues can prompt individuals to switch to the less-used mindset. Although these theories generally rest on the assumption that people are able to switch between mindsets, very little research has investigated the downstream consequences of this switching. Put another way, although there is widespread belief that people can switch between mindsets, there has been very little investigation into how this switching takes place, and the possible costs of switching mindsets.

In this research, we propose that switching mindsets is an act of self-regulation and, as such, is governed by the same psychological mechanism that accounts for other acts of self-regulation. Recent research suggests that disparate acts of self-control (e.g., restricting emotional displays, concentrating on a task, resisting temptation) utilize a common executive resource. It has been proposed that there is a finite supply of this self-regulatory resource upon which to draw. Each act of self-regulation consumes some of this resource, leaving a smaller pool of resources to be used in subsequent attempts at self-regulation. Although this resource replenishes with time, it can easily be depleted in the short term, leaving individuals vulnerable to failures of self-control.

We argue that switching between any qualitatively different mindsets also consumes precious self-regulatory resources. We test this prediction by using a two-task paradigm previously used to test self-regulatory depletion. In the first phase of all our reported experiments, some individuals perform a task that requires them to switch back and forth between different mindsets, while others will perform a substantially similar task that does not require switching mindsets. In the second phase, individuals will perform some task that requires persistence or concentration—in other words, something that requires the expenditure of self-regulatory resources. If, as we propose, switching between mindsets can lead to depletion, we should expect to find that individuals who had to switch mindsets perform worse on the second task.

We test this prediction in a series of three experiments. Experiment 1 shows that participants switching between abstract and concrete mindsets were subsequently willing to consume less of a healthful, but unpleasant tasting drink than participants who maintained a single mindset. In the second experiment, participants performed a task that either activated a promotion or a prevention mindset or a task that required switching between the two. Participants who switched between mindsets did not persist as long on an impossible puzzle. Experiment 3 found that participants who maintained either a locomotion or an assessment mindset were later better able to stifle external displays of emotion than participants who switched between locomotion and assessment mindsets.